Meaning

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The Room and the World Beyond

The room was small and dim, no more than a square box pressed between crumbling walls of gray stone, tucked in the third floor of a weary building in the heart of St. Petersburg. The winter light that seeped through the grimy window was weak, barely pushing past the frost-lined glass to touch the stained walls. Inside, silence hung like a shawl over everything. A single wooden table stood crooked in the corner, one leg splintered and stabilized with a folded scrap of newsprint, now darkened with grease and years of dust. Upon it lay a candle nub, its base melted into the wood, surrounded by burned-out matches and a bent spoon left unwashed.

The chair beside it was painted once, perhaps green, though now most of the color had peeled away in scabs, leaving behind a surface as raw as Fjodor Sukharev's thoughts. Its back was cracked; its seat bore the indent of a solitary life sat long in silence. Against the far wall, near the stove that no longer functioned, stood a narrow bed — little more than a wooden frame with a sagging straw mattress, the fabric of it yellowed and patched with old curtain cloth. A single blanket, stiff and coarse, lay crumpled on top. The scent of the room was thick — damp wood, burnt kerosene, the slow rot of time. Even the air itself seemed reluctant to move.

Books were everywhere, though none placed with any intent. They formed uneven towers beside the bed, cluttered the table, and spilled across the floor in patches like dead leaves. Some were philosophy volumes, others forgotten histories, a few religious texts with cracked bindings. Their pages were yellow and curling, covered in markings and scribbled thoughts, underlines with angry pressure where Fjodor's pencil had pressed the page like a wound. Among them were loose papers — torn edges, notes half-finished, some crossed out so heavily the page looked bruised.

The window looked down onto a street lined with dirty snow, where carts dragged by horses left thick brown grooves through the slush. Smoke rose lazily from chimneys into a low, wool-colored sky. The buildings across the way were faceless, their windows black with soot, their doors swollen with moisture. A pair of children dragged a bucket across the street, their scarves soaked and stiff. A man in a long coat shouted at a dog, and the sound bounced up from the alley like a cough. It was late winter in the city, when the snow did not so much fall as rot, melting into grime and bones.

The era moved slowly, as though frozen with the weather. Tsar Nicholas I ruled with an iron hand; military discipline and censorship held the country in a firm, quiet grip. Ideas were whispered in dark rooms; open thought carried risk. Those with money lived in decorative warmth — samovars, gilded mirrors, French pastries. But for the rest, it was potatoes, black bread, layers of patched coats, and rooms like Fjodor's: hollow, dim, aching with cold. The grandeur of empire flickered above, while below, men lived like forgotten sentences, barely spoken.

Fjodor Sukharev sat still in the silence, his coat still wrapped around him though he had returned home hours ago. He did not move, only watched the window as if expecting the sky to split. The day, the room, the weight of time — it all pressed on him like water held too long behind stone. There was no one to speak to, and nothing left to say. Only the groan of the building as it settled into another gray evening, and the dim flicker of a candle trying not to die.

From his narrow window Fjodor watched St. Petersburg move beneath a low ceiling of gray clouds, the city breathing in slow, tired motions. The streets were streaked with mud and slush, where the wheels of carriages carved deep ruts that filled with brown water. Horses snorted clouds of steam, their hooves striking the stones with a dull rhythm that echoed off the stone walls of the buildings. The air was heavy with the smell of coal smoke and wet wool, of iron and stale bread from the corner bakeries that opened early and closed with the fall of night. The wind carried that same bitter scent through the cracks in his window frame, reminding him that even the air outside was unkind.

A line of carriages rattled toward Nevsky Prospect, their drivers hunched against the cold in thick coats with fur collars turned up. The wheels splashed mud onto the hems of women's dresses as they hurried past, clutching baskets of fish, potatoes, and coarse bread. Soldiers in green uniforms marched through the square with rifles on their shoulders, their boots shining with oil, their expressions blank as if carved from one face. A group of students walked together, talking quickly, eyes glancing over their shoulders as though words themselves were dangerous. A beggar crouched beside the canal, his face covered in frost, a tin cup before him with only a few dull coins inside.

The city's noise was not the sound of life but of motion — a restless, mechanical rhythm, like the creak of a great machine grinding itself down. Men shouted over the prices of firewood and candles, women haggled in hoarse voices, children darted through the crowd like shadows, and everywhere the ring of boots, the roll of wheels, the hiss of gas lamps struggling against the fog. The lamps glowed faintly, their light swallowed by the mist that drifted from the river. Even at midday, the streets looked half-asleep.

"They move, but do they live?" Fjodor thought to himself, his eyes tracking the blurred shapes of people below. "Their gestures, their shouts, their rushing about—it all seems practiced, repeated, meaningless. As if each of them was born with instructions pinned to their coats. Wake. Walk. Eat. Argue. Sleep. Repeat. Not a single one stops to ask why."

He watched them with a strange detachment, as if they were not people but figures in a play that repeated itself without end. "Their laughter doesn't reach their eyes. Their sadness seems rehearsed. Is there even a real feeling beneath it, or only the memory of how it's supposed to look?" Fjodor wondered.

Perhaps they felt something when they laughed or wept, but even those feelings seemed to him like echoes, faint and uncertain. "Maybe life is just a pattern," he thought. "A set of gestures passed from one body to the next. Like smoke rising from a chimney. Beautiful for a moment, then gone. And no one even watches it vanish."

He pressed his forehead against the cold glass and looked down again. A woman scolded her child, a man shouted for his horse to move, a beggar muttered prayers that no one heard.

“It never stops,” Fjodor thought. “This city. These people. They march forward like sleepwalkers, believing there’s a point to all this movement.”

It all went on, endlessly, like the city itself — vast, gray, indifferent.

“I don’t know whether to envy them,” he admitted to himself, “or pity them. They look like they know where they’re going. As if their steps lead somewhere. Mine don’t. I just stand here. Breathing, but apart. Watching. And not a single face down there looks like it knows that all this might mean nothing at all.”

Each morning came to Fjodor not as a beginning but as a reluctant continuation. The dim light filtered through the window like dust, weak and uncertain, as if the sun itself hesitated to rise above St. Petersburg. He woke without urgency, his body stiff from the cold and the hardness of the straw mattress. The air in the room was sharp, biting at his fingers as he reached for his coat, which hung over the chair beside his bed. He wrapped it tightly around himself, feeling the chill seep through the worn seams. From the corner of the room came the slow creak of the floorboards, a sound he had come to accept as the only voice that greeted him at dawn.

His morning meal was an act of habit rather than hunger. On the small iron stove he kept a dented pot in which he boiled water mixed with scraps of cabbage leaves, the remains of yesterday’s soup. The smell was sour but faintly comforting in its familiarity. He tore a piece of black bread, hard as wood, and softened it in the thin broth. Each spoonful was taken slowly, not from care but from the absence of anything else to do. “It is strange,” he thought to himself, staring into the gray water of the pot, “that a man eats not because he desires life, but because he fears the feeling of hunger. The body commands, and I obey. What a pitiful sort of existence.” The candle burned low beside him, its flame trembling in the draft that came from the window frame. When he finished, he left the bowl unwashed and sat in silence, listening to the muffled sounds of his neighbors stirring in the corridor outside — footsteps, coughing, the clatter of a basin. “They wake, they wash, they dress, they go. For what?” he thought. “Is there any difference between them and the machines that grind grain all day? Only that men have learned to believe their movement has purpose.”

When the city began to stir, he put on his hat and stepped outside. The stairwell was dark and smelled of damp clothes and smoke. Down in the courtyard, a cat rummaged through a heap of ashes. The street beyond was layered with slush, and the carriages had already begun to move, their wheels splashing filth onto the stone walls. Fjodor walked without purpose toward the river embankment, his breath trailing behind him in short bursts of vapor. He liked the river because it asked for nothing. “It flows, but not for anyone,” he thought. “It has no dream, no hunger, no faith. The river lives more truthfully than man.”

He stood there for hours, watching the gray water slide beneath the bridge. Sometimes chunks of ice drifted past, bumping against one another with hollow sounds. The sky hung

low and colorless, pressing down on the buildings until their roofs seemed to bend under its weight. The city around him moved, but it did not live. “Even the stones breathe despair,” Fjodor thought, his eyes following the current. “This city exhales sorrow. It seeps from the walls, from the faces, from the air itself. How can one live here and not feel it in his bones?” Every sound — the crack of a whip, the distant barking of a dog, the cry of a vendor — seemed softened by resignation.

It was there, by the river, that his thoughts began to unwind in long, slow threads. “What does it mean to live,” he asked himself silently, “when each day repeats the last? Perhaps there is no meaning at all — only a thought of meaning, a small invention to make the silence bearable.” He stared at the drifting ice. “Meaning exists only in thought, and thought is nothing more than a flicker of the brain. A spark, gone in an instant. If that spark goes out, what changes? Nothing. The river still flows. The sky still hangs. The world does not notice.” He felt the words form in his mind like a quiet confession. “Perhaps that is all life is — motion without direction. The illusion of purpose made by frightened minds.”

He looked at the river and felt no sorrow, only stillness. “Men build cities, write books, chase love — all to escape the emptiness that waits behind the act. They dress up the void, give it names, pray to it, and call it meaning.” The thought did not frighten him. It left him hollow yet calm, as though he had stumbled upon a truth both cruel and peaceful. The water kept moving, slow and gray, and he kept watching, unable to tell whether he stood at its edge as a living man or as one already half-absent from the world.

Fjodor walked along the narrow street that curved toward the market square. The air carried the smell of flour and smoke, and through an open doorway came the laughter of the baker and his customers. The man behind the counter, his apron covered in white dust, spoke with an ease that seemed to belong to another world. His hands moved quickly, shaping loaves of bread, passing coins, smiling as though warmth were something one could bake and share.

“They laugh,” Fjodor thought to himself, pausing in the cold doorway, “but what is it that makes them laugh? A loaf of bread, a jest, a coin gained or lost. Such small things, yet they cling to them as if the universe depended on their joy. Perhaps that is what ignorance is — a mercy. To laugh without knowing that everything one laughs at will vanish.” He turned away, tightening his coat around his chest. “Still, maybe they are the wiser ones. To see nothing is to feel peace. To see everything as I do — that is the true curse.”

Further down the street a line of soldiers marched in unison, their boots pounding against the stones. Their uniforms were immaculate, their faces hard, their eyes focused straight ahead. The rhythm of their steps filled the air with order, a sound that made the passersby step aside in quiet respect. “Look at them,” Fjodor whispered to himself. “They move as one body, one thought, one will. They think themselves strong, brave, purposeful. Yet they march toward nothing but decay, obeying commands that will be forgotten, serving masters who themselves will die. Purpose — what an empty word when all roads end in the same earth.” He followed them with his eyes until they disappeared around the corner, their rhythm fading into the hum of the city.

At the park, the last snow of winter clung to the ground in gray patches. A young couple sat on a bench near the trees, their hands entwined, whispering softly. The woman laughed, her breath visible in the cold air; the man leaned closer and said something that made her smile. Fjodor stood watching from a distance. “So this is what they call love,” he thought. “Two beings comforting each other against the fear of loneliness, pretending it is something higher. They do not love each other; they love the idea of being seen, of being wanted. And when the novelty fades, they will part, both emptier than before. Love — a thought dressed as a miracle.”

He watched them rise and walk away, their steps light and careless. The park grew quiet again, the wind shaking the bare branches overhead. “They all find something to believe in,” Fjodor continued inwardly. “Work, duty, love — small fires lit in the dark. They warm themselves and call it meaning. Fools, perhaps, but harmless fools. They have not seen the emptiness that lies beneath it all. And I envy them for it.”

He turned back toward home, the street stretching long and gray before him. The city seemed to ripple faintly in the mist, as if seen through a veil of smoke. “Joy,” he thought, “is a trick of light — a reflection on the surface of a pond. Step closer, and it vanishes. Touch it, and there is nothing beneath your hand but water, cold and deep.”

He walked on through the fog, his boots splashing through the puddles, his figure blending into the grayness until he looked like a part of the city itself — another shadow moving without purpose beneath the heavy sky.

Night came slowly, settling over the city like a layer of ash. Fjodor lay on his narrow bed, staring at the cracked ceiling that seemed to stretch endlessly above him. The faint glow of his candle flickered on the walls, making the shadows dance like restless thoughts. The room was silent except for the low groan of the old building and the faint rustle of rats in the corridor outside. Somewhere below, in the tavern on the street level, voices rose in song — rough, drunken, desperate. The melody drifted up through the floorboards, fractured and faint.

“So they sing to forget,” Fjodor thought to himself, turning his face toward the sound. “Each note a small rebellion against silence. They sing because silence reminds them of death, and they cannot bear it. Yet when the song ends, the silence returns, and nothing has changed. We all pretend not to hear it, but it waits for us — patient, endless.” He listened as the song faded, replaced by laughter, then by shouting, then by nothing.

The candlelight trembled and threw thin lines across the ceiling cracks, forming strange shapes that shifted as the flame weakened. “If there is a God,” he thought, “then He must delight in the search, not the answer. He created man to question, to chase meaning where none exists. A cruel game — to give the mind the hunger for truth, yet place no truth in reach.” He stared at the dying flame. “Perhaps God exists only as an echo of our need, a word we whisper to comfort ourselves when faced with the void. Perhaps He made us to amuse Himself, or perhaps He too searches for meaning in His own creation. What kind of creator builds a world that feels like an afterthought?”

The wind outside pressed against the windowpane, rattling it gently in its frame. “No,” he whispered inwardly, “there is no plan. The stars are indifferent, the earth indifferent, the mind only a trembling light between two eternities of dark. We speak of purpose because we fear the truth — that we were born without one.”

The candle gave a small sigh as its wick burned to the end. The light dimmed, fluttered, and went out, leaving the room swallowed in blackness. Fjodor closed his eyes and listened to the silence. It filled the room like water, rising around him, soft and endless. For a moment, he thought he could feel the whole city breathing — slow, tired, and unaware. Then even that thought dissolved, and the night took everything, leaving only the dark.

In the Company of Shadows

The morning came hidden in fog, thick and colorless, pressing against the windows like a hand. Fjodor Sukharev rose from his bed without thought, the motion as natural and numb as breathing. The room was cold, the air still and heavy. He wrapped himself in his worn coat, its lining frayed, the buttons mismatched. One of the sleeves had begun to tear near the shoulder, but he did not mend it. He pulled his scarf tightly around his neck, not for warmth but out of habit, and stepped out into the dim stairwell where the damp walls smelled of smoke and mildew.

Outside, the city was veiled in mist. The buildings seemed to rise out of it like fading memories, their edges softened, their colors drained. The street was quiet except for the distant clatter of hooves and the occasional splash of water as a cart rolled through a puddle. Fjodor moved through the haze like a shadow, his boots darkening with the filth of the road. He passed a line of vendors near the square, their carts piled with silver-scaled fish, laid out like rows of staring eyes. The smell of salt and decay hung in the air. The women behind the stalls called out their prices without conviction, their breath forming clouds that vanished before their words reached the ears of passersby.

“They stand there like statues,” Fjodor thought to himself, glancing at the vendors. “Hands red from cold, faces blank, eyes dulled from repetition. They do not speak — they chant. Not to be heard, but to remind themselves that they are alive.” He watched a man pick up a fish and press it between his fingers, then toss it back with a grunt. The vendor didn’t flinch. “What kind of life is this? Trading pieces of death in the hope of surviving another week?”

He turned down a narrow street and heard the slow tolling of a bell. The sound moved through the fog like a wound in the air. From the side alley came a funeral procession — a horse-drawn cart carrying a plain wooden coffin, followed by three men in black coats and a priest murmuring prayers to the pavement. There were no flowers. No weeping. Only footsteps and bells.

“So even the dead pass quietly,” Fjodor thought, stepping aside. “No mourning, no spectacle. Just a cart, a coffin, and the ticking of time. Soon that will be me — though without even the

cart or the prayer." He watched them disappear into the mist. "And the city will forget as easily as it forgets this one. The ground opens, the body goes in, and the city continues."

He kept walking, his hands deep in his coat pockets. People passed him — a boy carrying a sack of coal, a woman wrapped in scarves holding a crying child, two clerks in worn suits arguing softly over ledgers. None of them looked at him. None of them looked at each other.

"Their faces," Fjodor murmured to himself, "are not alive. They are masks worn too long. Hollow. Exhausted. Each carrying their own weight, too heavy to notice the others." He slowed his pace and let them pass. "I wonder what fills their thoughts. Is it love? Debt? Sickness? Hunger? Do they question it? Or have they accepted that life is only this — a long walk through fog, without direction, without end?"

He stopped at a corner where the gas lamps flickered faintly through the gray. The fog coiled around them, swallowing their light like a throat. "Perhaps it is better not to see clearly," he thought. "If the fog lifted, we might see the world as it truly is. And we might not bear it."

Fjodor stood still, letting the cold settle into his bones. Around him, the city moved quietly, dim and blind.

The fog thinned as the morning wore on, revealing the dull shape of the city beneath it. Fjodor walked along a crooked street where the smell of baking bread floated through the air — warm, sweet, almost merciful. Outside the bakery, a small child sat on the icy ground, his coat no thicker than paper, his bare hands cupped together. His nose was red, his lips blue, and when he lifted his head, his eyes were too large for his thin face. Each time someone passed, he whispered something too soft to hear. Most ignored him. One man tossed a copper coin, not out of pity but habit. The coin bounced on the stone and rolled into the gutter. The boy didn't chase it.

Fjodor stopped a few steps away, watching. "He is closer to the truth than any of us," he thought to himself. "He expects nothing, asks for everything, and still receives nothing. Yet look at him — he waits. Perhaps that is what life is: waiting without hope, and still waiting." He looked through the bakery window. Behind the glass, a woman handed loaves to a customer, her face flushed from the oven's heat. "How strange," he thought. "Inside, warmth, laughter, bread. Outside, a child freezing to death. Two worlds divided by a pane of glass. And they call this order, civilization, God's will. If there is a God, He must be laughing."

He turned away and walked on. A few blocks farther, he saw a soldier sprawled in the gutter, his uniform stained with mud, his cap lying beside him. The man's hand still gripped an empty bottle. His chest rose and fell with uneven breaths, his face half buried in the slush. A few passersby glanced at him but said nothing. "Once he marched with pride," Fjodor thought. "Once he believed he served something higher — the Tsar, the nation, an idea. Now he lies here, his purpose leaking out of him like the wine from that bottle. He sleeps, and the world passes him by. Maybe he is the happiest man on this street. At least he has stopped pretending."

The wind grew sharper. Fjodor crossed the street and nearly collided with a woman carrying a heavy bundle of laundry. Her fingers were red and cracked, her face pale beneath a torn shawl. She moved quickly, eyes down, her breath coming out in short, trembling clouds. “There,” Fjodor thought, “is the true saint — not because she is good, but because she endures. She does not ask why. She does not think of fairness or meaning. She only moves forward. Thought would destroy her, so she does not think.” He watched her vanish around the corner, the bundle swaying on her shoulder.

He stood alone, surrounded by motion — the carts, the shouting, the smoke from chimneys curling into the gray sky. “Do any of them ask why they live?” he wondered to himself. “The child, the soldier, the woman — all bound by the same chain, all walking the same circle. And yet none of them question it. Perhaps ignorance is not a curse but a mercy. They live without knowing they live in vain.”

A gust of wind pushed against him, carrying the scent of smoke and bread and rot. Fjodor pulled his coat tighter. “How peaceful it must be,” he thought, “to not see the emptiness. To eat, to work, to sleep, and to never wonder. To live like the stones of this city — cold, heavy, and content in their silence.”

He turned his gaze upward, to the pale sky where the sun barely shone through the clouds. “They say knowledge frees the mind,” he murmured inwardly. “But it only frees one from peace. I envy their blindness. It keeps them warm.”

The air grew colder as the day advanced, the light fading into a pale, metallic gray that seemed to drain the color from everything it touched. Fjodor made his way toward the canal where the wind cut through the narrow streets like a blade. The water below was nearly frozen, its surface layered with sheets of ice that cracked faintly under the weight of the wind. Between the fractures, the dark water showed through, slow and heavy. He leaned on the iron railing, the chill seeping through his gloves, and looked down at the thin crust of ice that seemed almost strong enough to hold him.

“How cold must it be to die in there,” Fjodor thought to himself. “Would the body feel the pain before it went numb? Or does the cold simply erase the thought of pain? They say drowning is peaceful once the air is gone. But peace — does it exist for the dead, or only for those who lie to themselves about it?” He looked at the water as if it were a mirror that reflected not the sky, but the emptiness beneath it.

A few ducks sat near the edge of the ice, their feathers puffed against the wind, motionless, content. One dipped its head into the water and shook it off, droplets turning instantly to frost. Fjodor watched them for a long moment. “How serene they look,” he thought. “No thought, no worry. Just existence. They eat, they rest, they live as the world allows them to. Perhaps that is true wisdom — to live without the burden of knowing. Do they think? No, I doubt it. But they feel pain, I am sure of that. Yet they never curse the pain, never search for meaning in it. They suffer, then they sleep. How strange that man calls them lesser creatures.” He sighed and looked away from the ducks, feeling an ache of envy at their simple stillness.

Across the canal, the city spread in heavy silence. The Neva stretched far beyond, vast and frozen, its surface glinting faintly in the dim light. The grand facades of the buildings along its banks stood in solemn ranks, pale yellow and faded green, their plaster cracked and their windows rimmed with frost. The long avenues of stone were lined with iron lamps that flickered weakly through the fog, their light lost before it reached the ground. The domes and spires of the churches were wrapped in mist, their crosses dark against the gray sky.

People walked along the embankment with their heads bowed, their coats pulled tight, their steps quick and automatic. Their faces were colorless, stripped of expression, their eyes fixed ahead as though they all shared one destination, though none knew where it was. A man passed with a satchel under his arm, his mouth moving in silent calculation. A woman hurried past him, clutching a loaf of bread to her chest, her gaze hollow and distant. A pair of students spoke softly, their words lost in the wind, their faces pale and tense, as if even conversation had become a duty.

“They walk as though chased,” Fjodor thought. “Chased not by time, but by emptiness. None of them look around. None of them see the river, the sky, the world. They move because they must move — because stopping would mean feeling, and feeling would mean despair.” He ran his fingers along the frozen railing, the metal burning his skin through the glove. “I could let go,” he whispered inwardly. “A step over this railing, a brief fall, a sound, and then — stillness. The water would take me as easily as it takes the cold wind. But even then, would thought die with me? Or would it continue, trapped in silence, searching still for what does not exist?”

He looked again at the ducks, calm and unaware, their small bodies rising and falling with the slow movement of the ice. “No,” he murmured to himself, “they do not ask. They do not seek. They simply are. And for that, they are closer to peace than any man I have ever seen.”

The wind thickened, carrying with it the echo of footsteps and the faint toll of a church bell somewhere across the river. Fjodor remained by the railing, unmoving, as if waiting for the city itself to stop breathing.

He turned away from the canal and began walking aimlessly through the old streets that twisted through the heart of the city. The fog lingered in corners, clinging to doorways and stairwells, as if even the air had nowhere else to go. His boots struck the stone unevenly, the soles damp and worn thin. As he passed a row of iron gates, he heard it — the low, echoing chant of a priest from within one of the churches.

The heavy wooden doors were slightly ajar. Through the opening, he glimpsed the flicker of candles casting golden light on old icons, their faces solemn and unmoved. The priest’s voice rose and fell in practiced rhythm, intoning words of salvation, of mercy, of eternal rest. Inside, a few figures stood with bowed heads, making slow signs of the cross, whispering prayers with trembling lips.

“Salvation,” Fjodor thought to himself, pausing just outside the doorway. “They speak of it like a warm place — a refuge, a reward. But it is only a story, passed from mouth to mouth

like an old lullaby. Nothing more than a tale told in the dark to quiet the child afraid of sleep."

He stepped back and continued walking. The chant followed him faintly, echoing between the buildings like a memory that refused to fade.

"They fear nothingness," he thought. "So they invent heaven — a place where death is undone, where pain is explained, where suffering is paid back with joy. A place where everything finally makes sense. But sense is a thing man creates, not something the world gives. What arrogance — to think the universe owes us meaning."

The street ahead narrowed, and the church bells began to ring — not loudly, but slow, deliberate, like a hand knocking against time. Fjodor turned his head toward the sound. "They promise paradise," he said inwardly, "but none of them know what lies beyond the breath. They pretend to know. They dress it in light and song and forgiveness. But beneath all their hymns is one great silence. And they fear it."

He passed another church, this one with a crumbling facade, its domes darkened by soot. A beggar knelt near the steps, muttering prayers into cupped hands, rocking slowly. His eyes were closed, his face streaked with grime. Fjodor looked at him briefly, then turned away.

"Faith is not hope," he thought. "It is fear dressed in holy language. They speak of love, of purpose, of God's plan — but it's all a curtain drawn over the abyss. Heaven is not a place. It is a refusal. A refusal to accept that we vanish."

He moved on, his coat whipping in the cold breeze. Behind him, the sound of the chanting grew fainter, swallowed by the city's breath — carts rolling, dogs barking, children shouting in the distance. He walked faster, as if outrunning the lie.

"No one wants to vanish," he whispered inwardly. "So they build the afterlife. But I think — no, I know — that death is the only truth. And if it is, then salvation is nothing but a mercy invented for those too weak to face it."

He said nothing aloud. His steps were steady. But inside, the thought echoed like the bell: slow, cold, final.

As dusk fell over the city, Fjodor made his way back through the twisting streets toward home. The air had grown sharper, biting at his cheeks, and the fog had settled lower, as if the sky itself had sunk to rest upon the rooftops. The lamps were lit now, glowing weakly behind their sooty glass, barely pushing back the dark. Near the mouth of his street, just before the alley narrowed into shadow, he passed a group of men gathered outside a tavern.

They were bundled in thick coats, their faces red from drink, laughter spilling out of them in bursts that echoed against the stone walls. One slapped another on the back, nearly losing his balance. Another raised his bottle and toasted nothing in particular. Their joy was loud, exaggerated, as if the night demanded it.

Fjodor slowed as he passed them, not to look, but to listen.

“It’s not real,” he thought to himself. “Their laughter — it rings like a stage bell. Sharp, hollow. They laugh as if joy were a script and they’re afraid to forget their lines.” He studied their movements from the corner of his eye. “They perform happiness for one another, and maybe for themselves, too. And beneath it? Beneath it, the same silence I feel. The same weight. They just drown it in noise.”

One of the men burst into song, slurring the lyrics. The others joined him, stomping their feet in rhythm, but the sound dissolved into a kind of desperate mirth. Fjodor continued walking.

“Happiness,” he thought, “is not a feeling. It’s a performance. A costume worn in front of others. And everyone applauds each other for wearing it well. But when the door closes and the candle goes out — what remains?”

He climbed the stairs of his building, the air inside colder than the street. The wood creaked beneath his steps. The smell of boiled potatoes drifted from someone’s kitchen down the hall, and a baby cried weakly behind a door. He entered his room and shut the door behind him with a soft thud, leaning against it for a moment. Then he moved to the table and lit the candle stub with shaking fingers.

The flame caught, casting long shadows across the books and papers strewn across the surface. He pulled the chair closer and sat down slowly, removing his hat and placing it on the table. His hands were still cold. He reached for a scrap of paper and began to write, the pencil scratching faintly on the page.

“There is no comfort in thought. No peace in truth. The mind searches where nothing is buried and calls it a treasure hunt. But the field is empty. It has always been empty.”

He paused, reread the line, then struck through it with a heavy hand.

“No,” he muttered inwardly, “that isn’t it. That’s not even close. Words dress the wound, but they never touch the nerve.”

He began another sentence. *“Life is…”* and stopped. He stared at the paper, the pencil hovering, then set it down gently beside the candle. With one hand he gathered the pages, read the fragments scrawled there — unfinished thoughts, contradictions, denials — and slowly tore them in half. Then in half again. He dropped the pieces into a small metal bowl and watched them pile like dry leaves.

“Words lie,” he thought. “They circle around truth but never land. They explain everything except what matters. I could write until my fingers break, and still the emptiness would sit across from me, unchanged.”

He leaned back, staring at the ceiling as the candle flickered. The room was silent except for the faint crackle of the flame. Outside, the tavern laughter had faded, replaced by the slow groan of wagons passing through the street.

He closed his eyes. “Whatever this feeling is,” he thought, “it has no name. And so it cannot be spoken. Only endured.”

The candle burned lower, and the room dimmed, drawing the darkness closer, inch by inch.

Flesh

Fjodor woke before dawn, his skin slick with sweat though the air in the room was cold enough to cloud his breath. His body felt heavy, each movement a dull ache that pressed against his ribs and joints. He lay still for a while, staring at the dark ceiling, listening to the slow rasp of his own breathing. The fever came and went in waves, leaving behind a strange trembling that made even the smallest motion feel like labor.

“So this is the body’s revenge,” he thought to himself, turning onto his side. “It reminds me that I belong to it, that I cannot exist without its permission. Thought — that fragile illusion of freedom — chained to a lump of flesh that sweats, hungers, and decays.” He rubbed his temples, feeling the heat pulse beneath his skin. “What a vile thing, this body. It drags the mind down with it, makes a prisoner of every idea.”

He sat up slowly, the blanket clinging to his damp shirt, and reached for the jug of water by his bed. The water was stale and tasted faintly of iron, but he drank anyway, wincing at the metallic bitterness. His stomach turned, empty yet unwilling to accept even the simplest comfort. On the table lay the remnants of yesterday’s bread, hardened and gray around the edges. He broke off a piece and forced it into his mouth, chewing mechanically.

“How degrading it is,” he thought, “that a man must eat to keep existing. To think that the continuation of thought depends on the chewing of bread, on the swallowing of crumbs. How absurd — that the same mind which contemplates infinity must bow before hunger like a beggar.” He pushed the bread away, wiping the crumbs from his fingers. “We build our worlds in the head, speak of eternity, of God, of love, and yet all of it stops if the stomach empties. The body rules the soul, and the soul obeys without question.”

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The fever made the edges of the room blur. He could hear faint noises from the corridor — a door opening, a cough, footsteps on creaking wood. “They too are slaves to the same master,” he murmured inwardly. “All of them, feeding, sleeping, sweating, suffering. We call ourselves men, thinkers, dreamers, but in truth we are only clever animals, dressing our instincts in fine words.”

He pressed his hand against his forehead, feeling the heat rise again. “I despise this body,” he whispered to himself. “It ties me to everything I wish to escape — to hunger, to sleep, to pain. Thought is the only pure thing in me, and even that flickers like a candle trapped in the wind of flesh.”

He sat motionless for a long time, listening to his heartbeat echo faintly in his ears. The candle on the table had burned low during the night, leaving a small pool of wax hardened beside the wick. Outside, the city had not yet woken; the streets lay still beneath a gray, unfeeling sky. “Perhaps,” he thought, “it is not the mind that gives life to the body, but the

body that gives life to the illusion of the mind. When this heart stops, thought will stop too — and with it, all this pointless questioning."

He looked down at his hands, pale and trembling. "So fragile, and yet they believe themselves divine." He laughed softly under his breath — not out of humor, but weariness — and whispered inwardly, "What a grotesque design: to build a creature that thinks it was made for eternity, but which cannot even endure a fever."

The fever settled in his limbs like soaked cloth, clinging and heavy. Fjodor sat motionless at the table, staring at the small flame of the candle, now lit again, its light dim and restless. Outside, morning had broken, but the sun did not shine. The sky remained the same flat shade of gray, indifferent as always. He pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, the edge of it fraying against his neck, and allowed his thoughts to wander, sluggish and reluctant.

A memory came, unbidden — the faint image of a woman's face. He saw her standing beneath a tree in late autumn, leaves falling behind her like faded embers, her eyes warm with something that had once seemed beautiful. Her name no longer came easily to him. Only the shape of her voice remained, and the pale curve of her smile.

"I loved her," Fjodor thought to himself slowly, tasting the words like something sour. "Yes… once. When I was young, when I still believed such things meant something. But what was that feeling, truly? Was it love, or only the hope of escaping myself through her? Did I desire her, or did I simply desire to be seen?"

He rubbed his temples, eyes shut. The warmth of the candle drifted barely an inch from his hands, and still the cold clung to his bones. "Love," he murmured in thought, "is not a thing of the world. It's a mirage in the mind. A sweet lie we whisper to make loneliness seem like a choice. We dress it in poetry and memory, but beneath it lies need — raw, hungry, blind."

He remembered how it had ended. There had been no great betrayal, no dramatic rupture — only silence that grew wider until it swallowed them both. The letters stopped. The meetings faded. She had gone on, married perhaps, had children perhaps, carried her warmth into another life that had no space left for him.

"And yet I told myself it was love," Fjodor thought, bitterly. "As if by naming it, I could make it sacred. But thought can call a shadow by any name — it changes nothing. I needed her, and she needed to be needed. That was all. That was the whole thing. A transaction of loneliness. A theater, not a miracle."

He looked toward the window, the glass beaded with condensation. A couple passed by below, their arms linked, heads close together against the wind. He watched them until they disappeared into the fog.

"They think what I once thought," he reflected. "That they've found something eternal, something pure. But they are only playing their roles. They'll learn, in time. Either the need will change shape, or it will rot. Then they'll speak of love as I do now — in fragments, in questions, in doubt."

His fingers drummed against the table, slowly, without rhythm. “Love is not real,” he concluded to himself. “Not in the way people believe. It is thought pretending to be feeling. It is the mind's way of giving form to absence. We do not love others — we only try to lose ourselves in them. But the self always returns, and when it does, the illusion fades.”

The flame of the candle flickered as the draft crept through the cracked window. Fjodor leaned closer to it, though he felt no warmth, only the slight movement of air against his skin. “So I loved,” he whispered inwardly, “and it meant nothing. I was not saved by it. I was not changed by it. It left, and I remained — exactly the same man, only quieter.”

By midday, the fever had deepened. Fjodor’s skin burned, yet his fingers were cold, his breath shallow and uneven. He lay curled on the bed, wrapped in his coat and blanket, yet the chill pressed through all layers, reaching inward. His limbs ached as if dragged through ice, his head throbbed with dull weight. Time passed strangely — in fits, in echoes.

At some point, he drifted into sleep. In the dream, he found himself lying in an open field, snow falling gently across his chest, his arms, his face. The sky above was pale and vast, and not a single sound stirred. No footsteps, no voices, no wind. Only snow — endless, soft, unhurried. He did not move. He felt no hunger, no weight, no need to speak or think.

“This,” he thought within the dream, “this is peace. Not joy, not warmth, not comfort. Just the absence of everything else. No questions, no past, no future. Only white.”

He watched as the flakes settled across his body, and he welcomed them, each one like a soft hand laying him to rest. He did not resist. He did not fear. It was the first time he had felt the shape of peace, and it needed no words.

But the peace didn’t last.

A sound intruded — slow, steady, sharp. He stirred in the bed, disoriented. The snow was gone, the field gone. The ceiling hovered overhead again, cracked and stained with old water marks. The room was gray with weak afternoon light. From somewhere above, water dripped through the beams, hitting the floor with maddening rhythm — tap… tap… tap.

Fjodor groaned and sat up with effort. His skin was slick with sweat. He wiped his face on the blanket and looked at the corner of the room where the leak had begun. A dark spot had bloomed on the floor beneath it. The water fell into it endlessly.

“So even dreams betray,” he thought to himself. “Even peace cannot be trusted to stay. Sleep promises escape, and then delivers me back into this.”

He reached slowly toward the small drawer in the table, pulled it open, and retrieved a worn notebook with creased pages. His fingers trembled as he opened it to a blank sheet. He stared at it for a moment, then dipped the pen and scrawled in uneven lines:

Life is a punishment for being aware.

He paused. The words sat on the page, stark and cold. “Yes,” he thought, “that’s what it is. Not for sin. Not for failure. Simply for knowing. For seeing too clearly. The world punishes us not with pain — pain passes. But with awareness. With the burden of thought, of memory, of possibility.”

He dropped the pen beside the notebook and let his hand fall back into his lap. The dripping continued — steady, indifferent.

“Insects live and die without question,” he thought. “Stones lie in the ground for centuries, untouched by purpose. But man — man is made to see, to ask, to want meaning. And that is his torture.”

He leaned back in the chair, letting his head rest against the wall. He did not close his eyes. He simply stared forward, unmoving, as though waiting for something to stop.

The evening dimmed the room again, as if the world outside had drawn a curtain across the sky. Fjodor remained seated, his fever no better, the ache now deeper, settled into his chest and spine. He stared at the closed notebook on the table, its spine bent, the ink of his last words already beginning to fade into the paper. The dripping continued in the background, like the ticking of a slow and uncaring clock.

His thoughts drifted, unbidden, to the voices of his past — voices from years ago, from other lives that now felt like dreams spoken by strangers. He recalled sitting in dim rooms filled with pipe smoke and quiet argument, where men debated the future over weak tea and trembling candles. They had spoken with conviction, with a kind of borrowed fire, their words dancing with ideas of progress, of labor, of God’s justice working through time.

One man had spoken fervently of work — how labor gave man dignity, how it shaped the soul and connected him to the earth. Another argued for history’s great arc, how progress unfolded like a divine script, each generation building on the last, moving toward enlightenment. Others whispered of faith, of salvation earned through suffering, of meaning found in sacrifice and obedience. Fjodor remembered listening then, not speaking much, though once, long ago, he too had tried to believe.

“They spoke as if the world were becoming better,” he thought to himself now, “as if all this noise and toil could build something worth enduring. As if each wheel turned by a tired hand meant something. But they never saw what was plain to me — that progress does not lift the burden, it only changes its shape.”

He rose slowly, crossing the room to the window, where the fog had thinned just enough to reveal the flickering lamps of the street below. A man pulled a cart, hunched beneath the weight of something unseen. A woman swept her stoop with dead eyes. A group of students passed, talking quickly, their collars turned up, their faces strained.

“Machines, new words, new laws, brighter lights — all of it,” Fjodor thought, “but the same hunger in the belly, the same ache in the bones, the same emptiness behind the eyes. Progress

only refines the illusion. It gives the suffering cleaner names, puts it in finer clothes, but the soul still bleeds the same."

He pressed his forehead to the cold glass. The streetlamp outside flickered and steadied, casting a dim halo on the pavement.

"We work harder," he continued inwardly. "We believe more, obey more, hope more. And for what? To build monuments over the same graves, to speak of glory while the earth devours us? The future is a promise made by the dead to silence the living."

He turned from the window, the cold still on his skin. The fire in the stove had gone out, though he hadn't noticed it dying. He looked back at the notebook, its cover now half-lit by the candle's flame.

"They believed," he whispered inwardly, "and perhaps they were lucky to believe. But belief doesn't change the ending. It only distracts the mind long enough to keep moving toward it."

He returned to the chair and sat without writing, listening again to the steady drip of water from the ceiling — a rhythm older than thought, older than belief, older than man.

The evening brought with it a stillness that clung to the room like frost on glass. Fjodor sat at his table, hunched slightly forward, staring into the heart of the candle's flame. It danced and quivered in its own quiet suffering, and he watched it not as light but as the last visible trace of something that would soon vanish. The walls around him had darkened to a dull gray, the corners swallowed in shadow.

His body ached. The fever was not as sharp now, but it lingered like smoke in the lungs, settling into every joint, every bone. He ran a hand along his arm and felt the damp fabric of his shirt clinging to his skin. He could smell himself — stale, unwashed, sickly. The very presence of the body offended him.

"I am tied to this rotting shell," he thought to himself, the flame reflected in his glassy eyes. "A sack of nerves and weakness, always demanding. It sleeps, it starves, it aches, it breaks. And for what? To carry thought for a few short years?"

The candle popped, the wick sinking slightly into the wax. Fjodor sighed and stood, wrapping his coat around his thin frame. The cold in the hallway hit him instantly as he opened the door. The corridor was dim and smelled of boiled cabbage and kerosene. He moved slowly, his slippers silent on the boards, toward the communal kitchen at the far end of the hall.

The kitchen was a cramped, grease-darkened room with one window that never opened, its glass permanently fogged. The sink was stacked with dirty bowls and spoons. The stove gave off a faint warmth, one burner hissing with tired life. Fjodor filled a small pot with water from the basin, dropped in a handful of oats, and set it on the flame.

He stirred with a bent spoon, watching the mixture thicken, steam rising in lazy curls. The smell was faintly sour, but warm. He added a pinch of salt from a jar on the shelf, then

poured the porridge into a chipped bowl. From a small bottle wrapped in cloth, he poured a few spoonfuls of sour milk over the top.

He sat at the crooked table and began to eat slowly, each spoonful thick and bland, the milk curdled and sharp on his tongue. He ate not from hunger, but from necessity, resenting every motion.

Just as he finished, the door swung open and Olga entered — a thickset woman in her fifties with a kerchief tied tightly around her head and a mouth set permanently in displeasure.

“There you are,” she said loudly, without greeting. “Again with the mess yesterday. Food all over the floor under the table like pigs live here, not men. Was it you? It’s always you.”

Fjodor didn’t respond. He stared into his empty bowl.

“I’m not your maid,” Olga went on, voice rising. “Every day I find something — breadcrumbs, potato peels, milk on the floor. Do you think the floor cleans itself? I’ve lived here twenty years and never seen a man so careless.”

Still, he said nothing.

“You live like a rat and drag the rest of us into it,” she snapped, grabbing a rag from the counter and wiping a clean spot furiously, as if it had personally offended her. “Maybe if you stopped writing those little papers of yours and swept a little, you wouldn’t be such a burden to decent people.”

Then she turned, muttering something else under her breath — a slur, maybe, or just a final curse — and slammed the door behind her. The sound echoed in the pipes.

Fjodor sat still, spoon in hand, staring at the streak she left on the table.

“Even in decay,” he thought to himself, “there is no peace. We rot together, like meat in a shared cellar, blaming each other for the stench.”

He pushed the bowl aside and stood, slowly. The flame on the stove hissed, then went out. The silence returned, thick as dust.

The Iron Mercy

The next morning broke cold and brittle, the light pale as bone. Fjodor Sukharev rose before dawn, though he had not truly slept. His fever had subsided, leaving behind a faint hollowness that felt almost like clarity. The decision had been forming in him quietly, not with urgency but with the slow inevitability of something long known. He dressed with deliberate care — his coat buttoned, his scarf wound tight — and stepped into the narrow street.

Snow was falling, light and steady, coating the cobblestones in soft white that muffled the sound of the city. The air was sharp and clean, the kind of cold that cleared the head. Fjodor walked without hesitation, his steps slow but steady, until he reached a small pawnshop tucked between two shuttered bakeries. Its windows were dim, its sign half-faded, the lettering barely legible beneath layers of grime.

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of oil, rust, and old wood. Rows of watches, knives, and tarnished trinkets lined the shelves. Behind the counter, the shopkeeper — a thin man with a stooped back and watery eyes — stood polishing a brass lamp with a rag that had long since lost its color. He looked up briefly as Fjodor entered, then back to his work, as if accustomed to seeing ghosts in daylight.

Fjodor approached the counter and spoke softly. “I want a revolver.”

The shopkeeper paused, not startled, not even curious. He nodded once, then turned to a locked cabinet behind him. “Something small?” he asked.

“Yes,” Fjodor replied. “Small.”

The man produced a black revolver, its barrel scratched, its metal dull with age. He placed it on the counter carefully with a carton box of bullets, the way one might set down an old book. “It works,” he said. “Six chambers. You’ll need to clean it. Five rubles.”

Fjodor took from his pocket a small bundle of coins, wrapped in paper — the last of what he owned. He counted them out without looking up.

The shopkeeper swept the coins into a drawer without comment, then wrapped the revolver in a piece of cloth. Their eyes met for a brief moment .

“There are no returns,” the man said flatly.

“I won’t need to return it,” Fjodor answered.

The shopkeeper nodded once, and that was all.

Outside, the snow had thickened, falling in wide, soft flakes that blurred the outlines of buildings and people alike. Fjodor walked home through it, the wrapped revolver hidden in his coat pocket. The city’s usual noise seemed distant, dulled by the snow. Even the horses’ hooves made no sound against the ground.

He felt no dread, no excitement — only an unfamiliar stillness.

“So this is calm,” he thought to himself. “Not peace, not relief, but calm — the quiet that comes when there is nothing left to decide.”

He looked at the snowflakes melting on his gloves. “It is strange,” he mused inwardly, “how light the body feels once it has agreed to die. As if it has been forgiven its own weight.”

The city stretched ahead, pale and silent. He kept walking, the wind brushing softly against his face, his footprints disappearing behind him as quickly as he made them.

When Fjodor returned home, the light was already fading. He closed the door behind him and stood in the stillness of the room for a moment, listening to the faint murmur of footsteps and distant voices in the corridor. Then he unwrapped the cloth and placed the revolver on the table beside the candle. The metal caught the flicker of light and gleamed faintly, its dull reflection trembling on the wooden surface.

He sat down, resting his hands in his lap, and simply looked at it. It was smaller than he had imagined — an unremarkable object, plain, mechanical, harmless in stillness. Yet in that stillness, it carried the power to silence every thought, every ache, every question that had followed him through fifty empty years. The candle burned quietly beside it, its flame bending toward the gun as though drawn by the cold shine of the metal.

“So this is it,” he thought to himself. “This little machine holds more truth than all the books I have ever read. A curve of iron and powder — and it can stop thought itself. No arguments, no philosophies, no hopes. Only silence.”

He leaned closer, tracing the outline of the revolver with his eyes, noticing the scratches along the barrel, the worn grip polished smooth by other hands. “How many before me held this same weight?” he wondered. “Did they also sit like this, staring, asking whether their decision meant anything? Did they find an answer before the sound came?”

He reached out but did not touch it. His fingers hovered above the cold metal, uncertain. “It both repels and invites,” he thought. “It’s a god made by men — a god that gives what no other can: an ending. And yet I hesitate. Why?”

He leaned back in his chair, eyes still fixed on the object. “Perhaps the decision to die is no different from the decision to live. Both are born from thought, and thought is the same flicker that has deceived me all my life. Maybe dying, too, is an illusion — another attempt to give meaning to an emptiness that has none.”

The candle sputtered, throwing shadows across the wall. Fjodor’s face shifted in the wavering light, hollow and still.

“What if death is not the escape I imagine?” he thought. “What if it is only another act of thought, another circle returning to itself? If life is meaningless, then so must be the end of it. Perhaps all choices are the same, and the difference between life and death is only the direction in which one turns one’s head.”

He folded his hands together on the table and looked at the revolver once more. “And yet,” he whispered inwardly, “even if meaningless, it is the only decision left that promises silence. And maybe silence — even if it means nothing — is better than this endless asking.”

The candle flame leaned and steadied, its light glancing again across the cold barrel. Fjodor remained seated, unmoving, his eyes fixed on the small shape before him — a simple piece of iron holding within it the quiet he had sought all his life.

The next morning came dim and soundless, the city wrapped again in a slow gray fog that blurred all distance. Fjodor rose and dressed without thought, each movement calm, deliberate. The revolver remained on the table, wrapped once more in the piece of cloth, its presence neither urging nor deterring him. He slipped it into his coat pocket and stepped out into the corridor.

The air in the stairwell was cold and still, carrying the faint smell of wet stone and old smoke. Outside, the streets were nearly empty. The sky hung low, colorless, heavy with the threat of more snow. Fjodor began to walk, not toward any destination but through the familiar veins of the city he had known his entire life. His boots made no sound on the frozen ground.

He noticed everything — every motion, every shadow — with a clarity that felt almost unnatural. Smoke rose from the chimneys in thin, twisting ribbons, soft against the pale air. He watched it drift upward until it vanished, as though the sky had swallowed it whole. “Even the smoke leaves more gracefully than I will,” he thought to himself.

He turned down a narrow street lined with cracked stone walls, their plaster peeling away in long strips. The frost had traced white veins along the bricks. A frozen poster hung half-torn from a door, its words long faded. “Time erases everything,” he thought. “Even its own handwriting.”

A beggar sat motionless beneath an archway, his beard stiff with frost, his hands hidden in his sleeves. He did not look up as Fjodor passed. A few steps later, Fjodor saw another man sleeping against a wall, his face buried in his arms, a dog curled beside him for warmth. “They are closer to peace than I,” he thought. “They have already abandoned hope without needing to die.”

Further down the street, a pair of horses stood hitched to a cart, their breath rising in small clouds that dissolved instantly in the cold. Their hides were dusted with snow, their heads bowed, eyes half-closed. A driver smoked a pipe beside them, unmoving. “Even the animals have accepted it,” Fjodor thought. “They live, they pull, they rest, and never ask why. Perhaps they are wiser than all of us who think.”

He crossed the square where the church bells were tolling somewhere far off, the sound dull and distant. The statues of old generals and saints stood half-buried in snow, their faces streaked with soot. A woman hurried past him, clutching a bundle to her chest, her eyes fixed ahead. A small boy ran after her, slipping on the ice, laughing as if the cold itself could not reach him. Fjodor watched him go, and a faint echo of memory stirred, then vanished before it could take shape.

He felt no love, no fear, no sorrow. Only a strange stillness. It was as if he had already stepped slightly outside of life, watching it from the other side of glass.

“So this is what it is to be finished,” he thought quietly. “Not to feel despair, but to see everything clearly — and to want nothing from it.”

He walked on. The wind picked up, carrying flakes of snow through the air, brushing his face lightly as he moved through the city’s gray silence. The chimneys smoked, the walls crumbled, the horses waited, the beggars slept — and Fjodor walked among them, unseen, unfeeling, as though he were already a ghost rehearsing the path of his final return.

When he returned home, the streets were already dark, the fog now settled thickly over the city like a gray curtain drawn against the day. Fjodor climbed the stairs slowly, his boots leaving faint wet prints on the worn boards. The corridor was quiet, and only the weak yellow light from a single lantern flickered along the wall. He unlocked his door, stepped inside, and was greeted by the familiar cold of the room — the smell of damp wood and the faint trace of smoke from his neighbor’s stove drifting through the cracks.

He set his coat aside, lit a match, and touched it to the candle on the table. The small flame caught, trembling in the draft, its glow bending and straightening again as if uncertain whether to live or die. Fjodor watched it for a moment, then sat down by the window. Outside, the snow was falling again, thick and slow. It softened the edges of the city, hiding its filth and cracks, turning everything white for a little while before the soot of the streets would stain it back to gray.

He rested his hands on the table, the revolver beside him still wrapped in its cloth. He did not look at it. Instead, he reached for a small piece of paper and his pencil. For a few moments he hesitated, not out of doubt but out of weariness, as if his thoughts had already grown too tired to be shaped into words. Then he began to write, his hand unsteady but deliberate.

Meaning is a shadow cast by thought upon nothingness.

He looked at the words as though they belonged to someone else. The sentence sat on the page — simple, final, and cold. “Yes,” he thought to himself, “that is all it ever was. Not truth, not discovery. Only a shadow — made by thought, shaped by fear, and gone the moment the light fades.”

He read it again, quietly, his lips barely moving. The candle flickered, and for a moment the shadow of his hand passed across the page, darkening the words he had just written. “Even this,” he thought, “is only another shadow. Another attempt to make something out of nothing.”

He folded the paper once, carefully, and set it aside on the edge of the table. The candle’s light reached just far enough to touch its surface.

Outside, the wind pressed against the windowpane, and a few snowflakes struck the glass and melted, leaving thin trails like faint writing that vanished as quickly as it appeared. Fjodor leaned back in his chair and stared at them until they were gone.

“So it ends with a sentence,” he thought, “and perhaps even that is too much.”

Fjodor sat for a long time in silence, his hands resting on the table, the paper beside him folded neatly as though it were waiting for someone else to read it. The candle had burned low, the wax pooling around its base, the flame small and steady. He looked at the revolver wrapped in cloth, then slowly unfolded it, the fabric falling away to reveal the dull gleam of the metal beneath.

He turned it over in his hands, feeling the cold weight of it, the smooth curve of the handle. The metal smelled faintly of oil and dust. He studied it with quiet concentration, like a craftsman inspecting the final detail of his work. “Such a simple thing,” he thought to himself. “No mystery, no meaning — only a mechanism that obeys. A small answer to all the questions that have no answers.”

He opened the cylinder and loaded each chamber carefully, one by one. The bullets clicked softly into place, precise, indifferent. He closed the gun with a slow motion, hearing the faint metallic snap as it locked. Then he placed it back on the table for a moment and looked around the room — at the bed, the books, the walls stained with years of smoke, the single chair with its flaking paint. Everything was quiet, unchanged, expectant.

“So it will all remain as it is,” he thought, “and only I will vanish. Yet even vanishing is not escape — it is simply another form of staying gone.”

He picked up the revolver again and sat back in the chair. The candle’s flame bent slightly in the draft as he lifted the gun. His breath came out slow, calm. There was no trembling in his hand, no pleading thought for mercy, only an odd stillness — a kind of resignation that felt like relief.

He raised the barrel, pressed it gently beneath his chin, and for a brief moment, a single thought passed through him: “Even now, I am thinking. Even now, thought clings to life.”

Then came the sound — sharp, loud, and final.

The body fell beside the chair, one arm outstretched, the hand still half-curled as though reaching for something. The candle flickered wildly, guttered, then steadied again, its flame standing tall and silent. The air smelled faintly of smoke and iron.

But Fjodor was still there.

He looked down and saw himself — the body motionless on the floor, the dark stain spreading beneath the head, the eyes half-open and unseeing. Yet there was no horror, no confusion. Only observation. His thoughts continued, calm and detached, like ripples moving through still water.

“So,” he thought, “even death does not end it. The body lies still, but the thinking goes on. The cage has fallen away, yet the prisoner remains.”

He drifted toward the form on the floor, watching the candlelight play across its pale face. “I have died,” he said inwardly, “but I have not stopped. I am thought without body — still

bound, still asking, still aware. Death has not freed me from thought; it has only stripped away the noise around it."

He turned his gaze toward the window. The snow outside fell soundlessly, blank and infinite. "Perhaps this is eternity," he mused quietly. "Not peace, not darkness, but thought echoing endlessly into nothing."

The candle flickered once more, then steadied, its light resting on the motionless figure and the quiet shadow of the man who was no longer there.

The Shadow Beyond

Fjodor's awareness hovered lightly above the room, detached and soundless, like mist that had forgotten the weight of air. The first thing he saw was stillness — his own body crumpled beside the chair, its face turned slightly toward the table, one hand resting on the floor, fingers half-curled around nothing. The revolver lay a short distance away, its metal dark and unmoving. The chair had tipped and splintered, one leg cracked clean through. The candle on the table still burned, its flame steady now, small and indifferent.

The room was unchanged, yet it no longer belonged to him. The air felt empty, thinner than before, as though something essential had been drawn out of it. He saw every detail — the cracks in the ceiling, the stain on the wall near the stove, the uneven boards under the window. It was all so ordinary, so absurdly unchanged, as if the moment that had shattered his life meant nothing to the world around him.

He drifted closer, watching his own face in the dim light. The expression was almost peaceful, the eyes dull, the mouth slightly open. He felt no recognition, no grief, no fear. Only curiosity.

"So this is it," he thought to himself. "The body has finished its part, and yet here I am, still watching, still thinking. How absurd that thought survives when the thing that made it breathe lies broken on the floor. It should have ended — it should have gone dark with the eyes."

He circled slowly, weightless, his presence faint as dust in the air. "I am nothing," he thought, "and yet I remain aware of being nothing. Even in death, the mind refuses to be silent. What arrogance, what persistence. The brain stops, the pulse fades, and still the thought goes on, as if unwilling to accept its own extinction."

He looked again at the room — the chair, the candle, the body. The silence was total, perfect, almost holy. "This is the truth," he thought. "The world does not notice. It does not mourn. It continues exactly as before. And I — I am left thinking of my own absence."

The candle's flame flickered once, casting his body's shadow against the wall. For an instant, it looked as though the corpse were still alive, breathing faintly in the shifting light. Fjodor watched it, motionless. "Even now," he thought quietly, "I cast a shadow. Even now, I am

caught between being and not being. And the most absurd thing of all — I am still aware enough to know it."

Fjodor moved — or rather, drifted — though he could no longer tell how movement happened. The boundaries of the room no longer restrained him. The walls, once solid and cold, yielded like mist as he passed through them. He felt nothing — no resistance, no texture, no air against his skin — because there was no skin, no body, no breath. He was a presence without form, a thought freed from matter, yet still shackled to awareness.

He floated into the corridor. It was dark, the lamps extinguished, the air thick with the faint smell of damp cloth and extinguished wicks. The wooden floors creaked faintly beneath the shifting of the building, but there were no footsteps now, no living movement. He drifted past closed doors — behind one, the faint wheeze of an old man asleep; behind another, a child's shallow breathing; further still, the soft murmur of a woman turning in her bed. All these fragile sounds, each belonging to a body still bound to its heartbeat.

"They sleep," he thought to himself, "and believe it is rest. How different they are from me now. They do not know that they, too, drift so close to this silence every night, then return without memory. I have crossed where they will one day follow. And yet — I am not free. I have only lost the shape of my prison."

He moved further down the corridor, through the kitchen, where a pot sat cold on the stove, its water long evaporated. A broom leaned against the wall where Olga had left it earlier. The sight stirred nothing in him — no bitterness, no affection. Everything was precisely as it had been, yet he no longer belonged to any of it.

He passed through the outer wall of the building. The stone offered no barrier, no coldness. Outside, the snow was still falling, each flake descending in perfect silence. The city lay beneath him, dim and gray, the rooftops buried, the streets faintly lit by the dull glow of gas lamps. He hovered there, looking down at it all — the world of breathing things, their small movements continuing as if nothing had changed.

"So this is the truth of it," Fjodor thought. "Meaning was never in living. Nor in dying. It was never in flesh or faith, in hunger or love. Meaning itself was the illusion — an image cast by thought upon the void. And here I am, thought without flesh, stripped of every illusion, and still I continue. Still I think."

He turned his gaze outward, into the thick darkness beyond the city, where no lamps burned. "Perhaps this is the punishment," he murmured inwardly. "Not death, not life, but awareness without end — the thought that cannot stop thinking. Meaning is not what was lost, but what can never be lost — because it was never real to begin with."

He drifted higher, through the falling snow, feeling nothing, seeing everything. "Thought persists," he whispered silently. "And in its persistence lies the final prison."

Outside, the snow fell in unbroken silence, each flake moving with patient precision through the dim air. Fjodor rose above the rooftops, weightless, drifting through the pale fog that

hung low over the city. From above, St. Petersburg looked shrunken and distant, its domes and chimneys softened by the white veil that covered everything. The Neva lay frozen beneath a thin crust of snow, winding through the city like a long, sleeping vein.

The streets below glimmered faintly in the weak light of the gas lamps. Figures moved slowly along them, wrapped in coats, their heads bowed against the cold. Tiny puffs of breath escaped their mouths, vanishing almost as soon as they formed. To Fjodor, they appeared as shadows sliding across a frozen stage, their movements deliberate but empty of meaning.

“How small they look,” he thought to himself. “So fragile. Each one carrying his own bundle of needs, fears, thoughts — all believing themselves to be alive. Yet from here, they seem no more alive than snowflakes falling to melt into the same gray ground.”

He drifted higher still, watching the city breathe its slow, mechanical rhythm. Smoke curled from the chimneys, horses moved through the squares, the faint sound of bells drifted up from somewhere unseen. But none of it reached him as sound; it was only motion without voice, like a pantomime of life.

“They live,” he murmured, “but they do not know that they are already fading. Their laughter, their quarrels, their prayers — all passing through time like smoke through fog. They believe themselves solid, but from here, I see that they are made of the same nothingness I now inhabit.”

For a moment, he watched a window glow faintly with lamplight. Inside, a family gathered around a table — blurred shapes, indistinct through the frost-covered glass. The sight stirred something faint in him, not sorrow, not envy, but a kind of distant recognition.

“I was one of them,” he thought. “I walked those streets, I ate, I dreamed, I cursed the cold. I spoke of meaning, and I believed thought could grasp it. And now I see them, still circling the same emptiness that swallowed me. They are unaware — and yet, they are luckier for it.”

He turned his gaze toward the edge of the city, where the fog grew thick and the world seemed to dissolve into gray. He felt no body, no warmth, no hunger — only the persistence of perception.

“I am detached,” he thought, “but not free. I am beyond their reach, beyond the weight of flesh — and still I carry the burden they cannot see. They suffer through life; I suffer through what remains after it.”

He drifted slowly through the cold air, the snow passing through him, the city below shrinking into a single dull glow. “There is no freedom,” he whispered. “Not in the body, not outside it. Thought remains, clinging to itself, circling endlessly in the silence between what was and what will never be.”

The snow, the city, the rooftops — all of it slowly receded as Fjodor’s awareness drifted outward, further and further from the world he once knew. The light of the lamps vanished into fog, the outlines of buildings dissolved into gray smudges, and the human shapes moving

below grew so small they ceased to seem real at all. Even the silence changed — no longer the absence of sound, but something deeper, more absolute, like a silence that existed before sound had ever been born.

Fjodor did not move. He simply continued — or was carried — into a darkness that thickened with each passing moment. No sky, no stars, no snow. Only blackness, and within it, a soft unraveling.

He felt his thoughts slowing, stretching thin like smoke drawn apart by wind. The words that had once formed so quickly in his mind now came slower, less clear. His memory, once sharp with pain, began to lose its edges. Names, faces, rooms, streets — all of it blurred, as if water had been poured over ink.

"What… was I?" the thought came, faint and distant, like a voice through a wall. "Who… did I think I was?"

He felt the last traces of his identity — not just the man named Fjodor, but the man who had thought, who had questioned, who had stared at ceilings and books and windows — begin to fray like old cloth.

But one thing remained. A faint echo. A flicker.

A question.

Not spoken in words, not even fully formed — just a presence, a shape, the outline of something endlessly unfinished.

A question without an answer.

A thought without an end.

And though everything else — memory, image, emotion — had begun to dissolve, that question remained, turning slowly in the dark, without light, without voice.

It did not cry out. It did not seek. It simply remained, circling itself, like the final ripple in a still, black sea.

The darkness deepened until there was no direction left, no sense of above or below, no boundary between what was within him and what was beyond. Fjodor felt his awareness stretch thinner still, as though it were being absorbed into something vast and unmoving. There was no pain, no fear, only an immense quiet that swallowed every trace of what he had ever been. The last fragments of memory — his room, the candle, the sound of dripping water, the slow fall of snow — sank away one by one, their shapes breaking apart before they could fully form.

There was no light here. No color, no texture. Only a boundless stillness that did not change. If time still existed, it no longer meant anything. His thoughts came faintly now, like distant echoes returning from a place too far to name.

“This must be the end,” he thought to himself, though even that thought began to lose its shape. “No heaven, no hell, no awakening. Only this.”

He waited for something — a sound, a vision, a sign that the silence might hold meaning. But nothing came. The quiet was absolute. And in that quiet, even waiting ceased to have purpose.

The last of his thought flickered weakly, like the dying ember of a long-burned fire. The idea of himself — of Fjodor, of the man who had lived, walked, questioned — began to fade completely. There was no struggle against it. The thought simply thinned until it no longer existed as thought at all.

Darkness consumed everything.

Soundless. Eternal.

And as it closed around him, what had been Fjodor disappeared without trace — not into peace, nor torment, nor rest, but into the silent void where even the idea of meaning no longer exists.